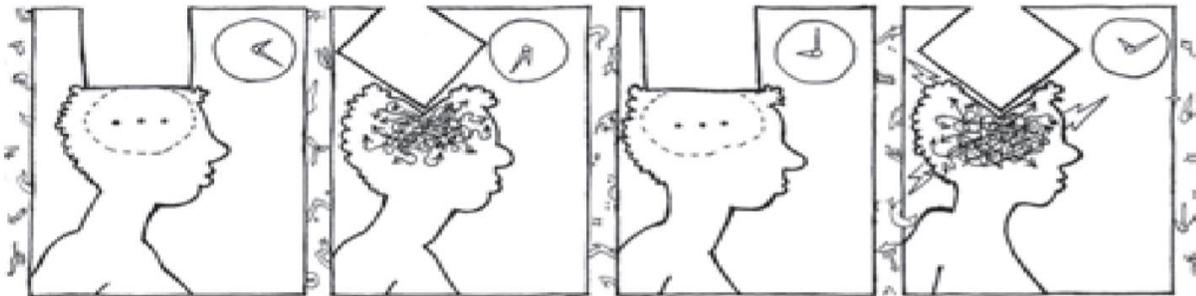




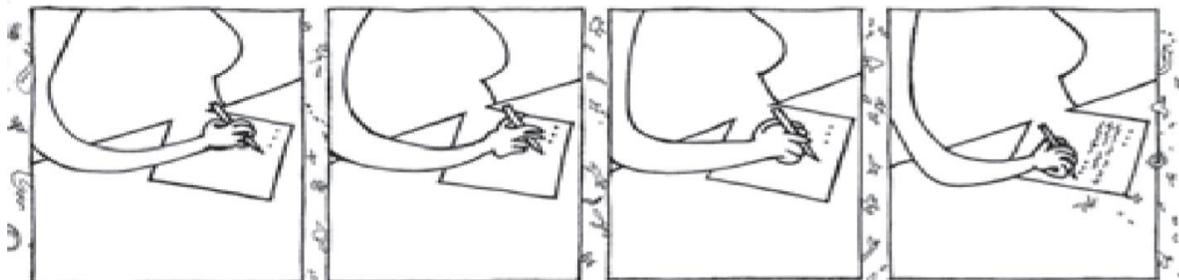
## BECOMING THE DISHES

Steve Bakker

**Getting caught up in agony over writing isn't anything new.** I've been told I was a "good writer" for most of my life—sometimes I believe it and I'm proud of what I've written, but I get stuck and self-conscious a lot. I got put on academic probation several times and failed out of college twice due to anxiety over work and not completing it. I have often wondered if something I am supposedly "gifted" at shouldn't come easier.



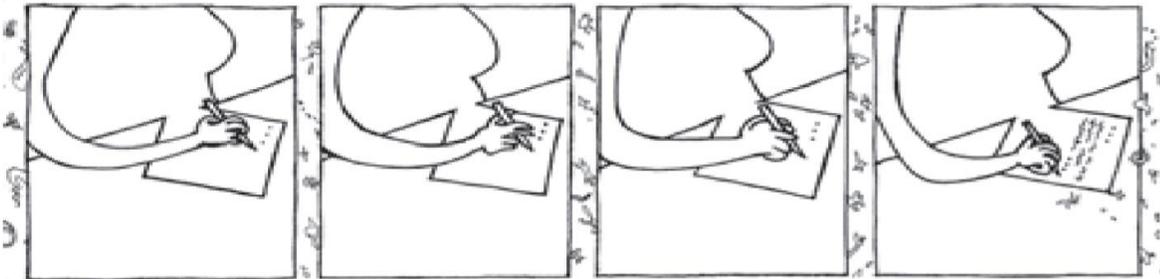
**Writing is still one of the hardest things I do.** What has changed, subtly and incompletely, is learning and relearning to accept the contradictions of pushing against, embracing, and accepting my anxiety in the writing process. I am less hesitant to put my arm around the shoulder of this flinching and terrified aspect of myself, coming to see it as not only a hellish companion but a worthy one. I've accumulated enough experience to recognize that accepting my agony around writing redirects its power into more constructive ends. More of my nervous energy channels into writing; less of it turns against my self.



**I have incrementally internalized advice from a grumpy Evergreen psychology professor, now retired.** To paraphrase him, “The really big psychological trouble people have doesn’t come from their suffering; it’s the suffering *about* their suffering that’s the real problem.” I have come to see my agony about my agony as the real killer in my writing process. The anxiety itself can be a disorienting pain in the ass just fine without my help; meanwhile, I can resume the work of writing.



**Sometimes accepting my anxiety doesn’t work.** I freak out and lock up. Then I either take a break or I rage against myself—sometimes I do both. When I rage against the agony-on-agony, it doesn’t budge. It might even get stronger. With outside human support, I’ve started to more deeply explore what constructive intentions might exist behind the savaging inner voice. Something behind the voice isn’t all bad. Something in it wants me to think more thoroughly and do better.



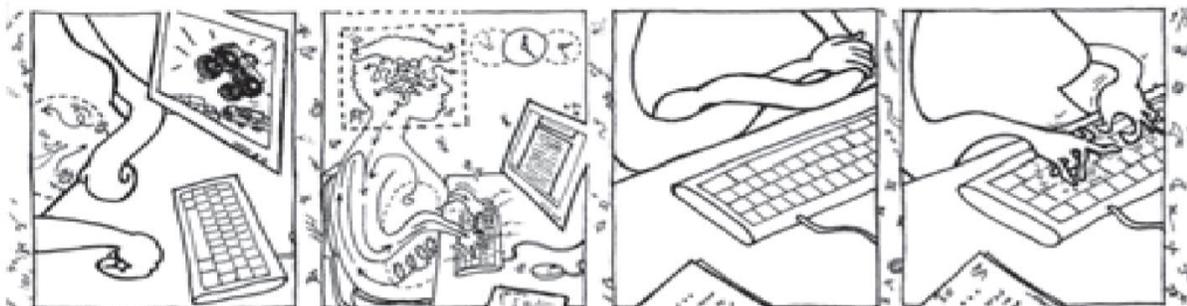
**Sometimes I enjoy writing.** My joy and anxiety are learning to take easier residence together. They sidle alongside each other as I write. My process starts with freewriting, lists, and crude outlines, half-procrastinating, half-processing my fragmented thoughts and frustration in filthy scribbles and filthy language. I usually feel disoriented, and what I write presents turbulent, cloudy streams of thinking. Then come the times when the writing unfurls into sharpening thoughts and scrawl. Currents of clarity run through the haze.

**Sometimes the union of this joy and sorrow is an ungainly grind.** Sometimes their paired electricity takes the ache of weight off my bones and it carries me away, and I become writing. But if I am to give due credit to joy and suffering's warming relationship—as slow, fast, and real as the melt of glaciers—I must say that the major mass of the time has been painfully unexciting and unsexy.



**If I'm continuing to grow as a writer, it's definitely taking its time.** Sometimes I wish writing would get easier, just like doing the dishes got easier. For me, doing the dishes automatically is a recent development: I didn't have to wash my dishes until I lived away from parents and campus cafeterias. Doing the dishes and not doing the dishes were both agonizing. I worried that I wasn't doing my dishes often enough, and when I was doing them, I worried that it was eating away too much of my time.

**It took a decade to get into the unconscious practice of doing the dishes, and I only noticed it had become habit in hindsight.** Doing the dishes is a non-issue now—I *am become doing the dishes*. I don't worry about the time it takes, like I do about so many other things. I didn't have to do the dishes twenty minutes every day at the same time to arrive as a dishwasher, as I have so often assumed I ought to do with writing. I just did the dishes pretty often. Practice can be imperfect and irregular and still add up. The growth is often invisible in the middle of the process, when it is actively lived. When did I really arrive as a dishwasher? When I first put a sponge to a plate. When did I really arrive as a writer? When my mother showed me how to scrawl an S and I followed.



**It would be nice if writing was as consistently fun as doing the dishes.** While water evaporates from drying plates, the sexiness and excitement of the daily kitchen sink endeavor

never do. They endure in the tingle of waterlogged fingertips. Dishwashing steams and foams into spans of passion that follow me into the rest of my day.

**Wait. Dishwashing is never that fun, and never sexy.** Writing sometimes is, and the pleasure lingers. Doing the dishes is important, but now I don't care all that much about it. I don't think about doing dishes better, or doing it for an audience. I care a lot about growing as a writer, and I care enough to risk presenting my writing to an audience. Pain and anxiety accompany the extent of that care. The agony comes and goes, and I expect it won't ever disappear. Whether exciting, agonizing, or mundane, there are times I love writing and love what I write. I wouldn't say that about doing the dishes.

**What I can offer from my experience is to keep at writing for agonizing and nourishing eons, even if you sputter and go dry for stretches of time and then get back to it.** Share it in progress, when it's an unfinished mess, with people who are able to respond to it constructively but with substance. This may be a search with dry stretches of its own. Keep seeking and keep finding. Keep insisting.

**When I finish a piece of writing, I'm never satisfied—and this is part of the process.** When I revisit my pieces after a time, I am more likely to be proud of the results. Even when I'm not, I always have a sense that reaching completion and some level of coherence in a work of intensive writing is miraculous. Expect that the miracle work will often be a clunky, mechanical exercise that is neither sexy nor exciting. Desert seasons of banality oscillate with flash floods of passion. Both of these do harm; both of these bear life.



